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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE

SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2355
Wilmer C. Fields, Director
Dan Martin, News Editor
Craig Bird, Feature Editor

BUREAUS

ATLANTA Jim Newton, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W. Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 873-4041
DALLAS Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 511 N. Akard, Dallas, Texas 75201-3355, Telephone (214) 720-0550
NASHVILLE (Baptist Sunday School Board) Lloyd T. Householder, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300
RICHMOND (Foreign) Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151
WASHINGTON Stan L. Hasteley, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

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Johnson Paying Price
For Step Into Temptation

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION
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By Norman Jameson

McALESTER, Okla. (BP)—It can be a short trip from the pulpit to death row.

Robby Johnson took the first step of that trip celebrating his 22nd birthday—and will regret it the rest of his life. Johnson was convicted in May with Jay Neill for the deaths of four people—three of them members of First Baptist Church, Geronimo, Okla.—in the robbery of the Geronimo bank Dec. 14, 1984.

Neither man testified at their combined trial. No testimony put Johnson at the bank during the robbery. Johnson claims he was in his apartment, completely unaware of what was happening.

Johnson said in an interview at the state penitentiary he did not testify because Neill told him he would testify Johnson was not involved in the robbery and knew nothing of it beforehand, although the two lived together as lovers. Neill didn't.

Now they live in adjoining rooms on death row in McAlester—and do not speak to each other.

Johnson turned 22 on Feb. 2, 1984. The next night he celebrated with his cousin, first drinking in a Cameron University dorm, then going out to a bar. There, they met Jay Neill. "Ever since then...it's like I belong to him," Johnson said.

Johnson promised Neill's parents in Missouri he would watch out for their son, who they were convinced was on the verge of getting into deep trouble. Neill was making restitution for using stolen credit cards, according to Johnson, and had lied to Johnson about the source of the money he freely spent.

Meanwhile, Neill was writing \$1,300 in bad checks. He was behind on his restitution, rent and car payments, Johnson said. Johnson began to hope authorities would finally "take him away."

Neill told Johnson he wanted a gun for self-protection, but since he had a criminal record, Johnson was going to have to buy the permit. Neill used it to buy a gun at a pawn shop.

Johnson swears the first he learned of the Geronimo bank robbery and murders was two days later on television news in San Francisco.

He said when FBI agents arrested Neill in the hotel hallway, he thought it was for the bad checks. When they knocked on Johnson's door, he told them, "Thank God you're here." He never suspected they wanted him too.

Ultimately, the jury was not convinced Johnson could know nothing of the pending crime because he lived with Neill, had bought the gun permit, and went to San Francisco on a spending spree with him. Johnson was sentenced to be executed.

Now Johnson, seeking a new trial on the basis the first one was unfair (primarily because he was tried with Neill) sits in McAlester prison, afraid for his life. He has been told by another inmate he "belongs" to that inmate when or if he ever goes into the general prison population. Because Johnson has granted several interviews to tell his story, Neill has branded him a "snitch," the worst prison vermin. That label makes him fair game for prison enforcers.

Johnson was two and his mother 18 when she divorced his father. Johnson said his stepfather molested him when he was six and for several years after. In high school he was teased and called names constantly because of his admittedly feminine mannerisms.

In January 1980, at the urging of a pastor cousin, Johnson reexamined his life and the profession of faith he had made at age seven and made a new commitment. He joined Letitia Baptist Church, became very excited about the work of the Lord, felt called to the ministry, and enrolled that fall at Oklahoma Baptist University as a ministerial student.

Sensing a further call to missions, he thought a good mission experience would be to attend and work in a black church. He joined Union Missionary Church in Shawnee, eventually becoming an unpaid associate pastor. When the church split over a conflict with the pastor, Johnson felt inadequate to shepherd the remaining members so he returned to First Baptist Church.

He loved OBU and had a "great time there, just great." Nobody harassed him. But in 1982 a homosexual friend convinced Johnson to leave school and live with him in Oklahoma City. They later moved to Norman where Johnson enrolled at Oklahoma University.

School at OU was less demanding than at OBU. Johnson had work and began to feel independent enough that he told his friend to leave. Then he felt lonely, so he went home again.

Home always was there for him. His mother welcomed him and his grandmother was a strong figure at home. His mother, Joyce Cook, divorced again in 1983, the same year Johnson enlisted in the Navy. He got out after a few weeks because he "feared for his mother's life" and he wanted to be home to protect her from the wrath of her former husband.

Johnson still wanted to finish college so he enrolled at Cameron University in Lawton, Okla., where he stayed until his fateful birthday celebration, where he met Jay Neill.

Johnson, who credits his Christian faith for keeping him sane, does not attend prison church. It is in that lax atmosphere that most prison knifings occur, he said. He does study the Bible with four inmates who share his morning hours outside in a caged compound.

Johnson had never been in any trouble with the law. "I always felt sorry for people in prison," he said. "It must be really awful, you know, and I'd always thought I wouldn't mind visiting a prison. Well, here I am. But it never dawned on me someday I would be in prison."

Johnson says the homosexual lifestyle, which he has given up, is not acceptable for a Christian. But he says anyone who reads the Bible should know why it is becoming more acceptable in society. "It (the end of time) is coming," he said. "God said at the end of time everything is just going to go to the devil."

Johnson has asked God to change the way he is, to lower his voice or change his characteristics and mannerisms, but "it hasn't happened."

As to his personal relationship to God, Johnson said, "I don't have to prove anything to anyone. We're all going to be judged. I'm going to be judged by myself and you're going to be judged by yourself."

"I'm a happy person and I try not to let anything get me down. Even being here I try not to let it get me down. But it seems the longer I'm here...I keep wondering how much longer it's going to be." He anticipates he will be notified of a new trial in six to nine months.

"It's tragic that life was lost," in the Geronimo murders, Johnson said. "But look at it from my standpoint. As of now, my life is lost. I didn't do anything."

"If everyone was like me, there wouldn't be trouble in the world," Johnson said. Indeed, repeated trial witnesses said Johnson "couldn't have done anything like this."

A jury decided he could have done something like that and sentenced him to die Sept. 30. His stay of execution came Sept. 23. Although the stay was automatic because of his appeal, facing his appointed day to die wrenched Johnson's psyche with dread.

Johnson doesn't look at his predicament as God's punishment, but rather as satan's reward, compensation for choosing to follow temptation. "When you get away from God, you get closer to the devil, and satan is trouble," he said.

Halsell Announces Retirement
From West Virginia Post

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (BP)—Immediately after the opening gavel of the 14th annual session of the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists executive secretary-treasurer Thomas E. Halsell announced his retirement effective Dec. 31, 1986.

Halsell, who came to West Virginia as executive secretary-treasurer from Indiana in October 1979, will reach his 65th birthday June 1986. West Virginia convention employment policy requires mandatory retirement at the end of the calendar year of the 65th birthday.

With the exception of one recommendation all the business of the convention was carried on without serious discussion or controversy.

A motion was presented which would make the pastor of the church hosting the convention each year a member of the order of business committee of the convention.

This motion grew out of a pre-convention problem when the scheduled host church withdrew its invitation to host the convention because it objected to two of the program personalities (James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, and Fisher Humphries, professor at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary) and did not want them to speak in their church.

The site of the convention meeting was changed less than two months before its meeting date.

The original motion was rescinded because of constitution and bylaw complications. A second amended motion was adopted which provided: "The pastor of the church hosting the state convention or a representative from his church be invited to attend the meetings of the program committee. He would serve as an advisor on arrangements without the power to vote."

Resolutions expressed support of the Peace Committee, hope for spiritual awakening, and concern for West Virginia flood victims. There were approximately 200 messengers and 100 guests attending the session, below the attendance figure set last year.

The recent floods which have devastated several areas of West Virginia have accounted for the decline in attendance according to some convention leaders. Some of the decline also may have been caused by having to move the convention site so close to the convention date.

The convention adopted a record budget of \$1,408,800, with 24.5 percent of the Cooperative Program receipts from the churches going out of the state for world mission causes. This is an increase of one percent.

There was one proposed constitutional change which would allow directors of missions, church planters and pastors receiving aid from the Home Mission Board to be on the executive board, but not on the state missions or finance committees. This was read to the convention, but no action could be taken until the next annual session.

Lester Hall, pastor of Memorial Baptist Church, Beckley, was reelected convention president without opposition.

The 1986 session of the convention will be hosted by Calvary Baptist Church, Morgantown. It will be held in the facilities of the Drummond Memorial United Methodist Church on Nov. 7-8.

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West Virginia Floods Affect
Baptist Churches And Church Members

By Jack Walls

Baptist Press
11/12/85

ST. ALBANY, W.Va. (BP)—Recent floods in West Virginia brought disaster to numerous towns with names like Weston, Moorefield, Petersburg, Marlinton, Parsons and Rolesburg.

There are Southern Baptist churches or missions in or near all of these communities.

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The Northfork Baptist Mission located near the Northfork River in Riverton, W.Va., has serious structural damage. All the brick was washed away from one side and the back wall of the building has a serious crack in it. There is three to four feet of mud and debris in the building and the furnishing have been washed away or destroyed. Mark McAllister, church starter and missions consultant in the Eastern Panhandle Association, said most of the damage was caused by the force of the rushing water. "It just swept away everything that got in its way."

It is not known if the building can be repaired or if it will be necessary to completely rebuild it according to McAllister.

The house in which the Newstead family, mission service corp volunteers there since 1984, was living was completely destroyed along with another church family's home. The congregation moved into their new building less than a year ago. It was constructed by volunteer North Carolina groups as part of the Mountain State 200, linking the West Virginia and North Carolina Baptist conventions.

McAllister said no other Southern Baptist churches in his area suffered serious damage. However, a number of church families were left homeless or suffered damages.

In Petersburg, W.Va., on the south branch of the Potomac River, it was reported that water rose within five inches of the traffic light which hangs over the main intersection.

The whole downtown section of Moorefield, W.Va., was devastated by the force of on rushing flood waters which floated houses, even a semi-truck, automobiles, furniture and groceries and other material goods and deposited them downstream.

McAllister said people are responding and the big problem now is trying to coordinate flood relief in the devastated areas.

Southern Baptists throughout the state and nation are responding to the emergency. The Home Mission Board has released \$10,000 for emergency flood supplies. The state convention designated \$3,000. A total of \$13,000 with the food supplies has already been sent to the devastated areas.

Southern Baptist Chapel at Rolesburg, W.Va., was the only building of any size in the community not damaged and is being used as the National Guard headquarters. It also is being used as the central distribution center for emergency supplies including food, clothing, blankets and fuel and other essential items.

The state convention has sent a large tent to the Rolesburg church at the request of Pastor Olin Phillips to help store the materials and supplies to be distributed.

The Illinois Brotherhood disaster food unit has been dispatched to Clarksburg, W.Va., to provide hot meals to flood victims and to those who are cleaning up of the flood debris. State Missions Director Jim Franklin is coordinating flood relief activities of Southern Baptists.

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Texas Baptist Elect
Paul Powell President

By Ken Camp

Baptist Press
11/12/85

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (BP)--Messengers to the centennial gathering of the 2.3-million member Baptist General Convention of Texas elected East Texas pastor Paul Powell as president, approved a record \$63.5 million missions budget and reaffirmed their commitment to a Mission Texas goal to begin 2,000 new congregations by 1990.

A record number of voting messengers, 4,273 from 906 churches, attended the three-day meeting in San Antonio.

Powell, pastor of Green Acres Baptist Church, Tyler, defeated B.O. Baker, pastor of Plymouth Park Baptist Church, Irving, in a runoff election. Also nominated was George Harris, pastor of Castle Hills First Baptist Church, San Antonio.

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Characterized by William Shamburger, pastor of First Baptist Church, Tyler, as "a moderate without a liberal drop of blood in his veins and a fundamentalist without a Messiah complex," Powell succeeds W. Winfred Moore, pastor of First Baptist Church, Amarillo. Moore was president for the traditional two, one-year terms.

Shamburger said Powell's 6,200-member church is one of the fastest growing in the Southern Baptist Convention and is one of the top 20 Texas Baptist churches in total gifts to missions through the Cooperative Program, the unified Baptist method of missions support.

Jerold R. McBride, pastor of First Baptist Church, San Angelo, was elected first vice-president, and Daniel J. Rivera, president of Hispanic Baptist Theological Seminary, San Antonio, was elected second vice-president.

The 1986 Cooperative Program budget for missions includes more than \$22 million (36.5 percent of the budget—an increase of .2 percent over last year) for worldwide causes. The remaining \$38.4 million is for Texas Baptists' 27 educational and benevolent institutions and state missions causes.

In a pre-convention meeting, Sam Cannata, missionary-in-residence at Baylor University, Waco, rebuked Baptist churches who isolate themselves from the poor. He criticized what he termed the "million-dollar fad" of Baptists building "Christian country clubs"—elaborate family life centers—while giving "crumbs from the table" to missions.

Messengers responded to the challenges of a needy world by affirming resolutions asking Texas Baptists to continue ministries to the poor, commending the 69th Texas Legislature for addressing the hunger and health care needs of the poor in Texas, and encouraging churches to increase percentage giving to missions through the Cooperative Program.

Resolutions affirming clergy confidentiality, supporting efforts to curb alcohol abuse, and urging Texas Baptists to make available guidelines concerning the Equal Access Law to parents and educators in order to encourage implementation of the law in Texas were among the 15 resolutions considered by messengers.

Messengers at the final session also passed a motion calling for reconsideration at the next annual session in El Paso of ten constitutional amendments which had been proposed but failed to receive the necessary two-thirds vote. The motion asked that the amendments be referred to the BGCT Executive Board for further study, and that the convention's constitution and bylaws be studied and the findings published in the Baptist Standard, the Texas Baptist weekly newsjournal.

Next year's meeting will be Nov. 4-6 in El Paso.

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Baptist Missionaries In Liberia
Safe Following Attempted Coup

Baptist Press
11/12/85

MONROVIA, Liberia (BP)—Southern Baptist missionaries were reported safe Nov. 12 after an attempt to overthrow Liberian President Samuel K. Doe.

Gen. Thomas Quiwonkpa, who played a major role in the coup which brought Doe to power in 1980, reportedly had surrounded Monrovia, Liberia's capital, with soldiers early Nov. 12 and forced Doe to flee. However, later reports indicated Doe was heard broadcasting from the national radio station that his forces were in control.

Bradley Brown, executive director of the organization of Southern Baptist missionaries in the West African nation, said he heard the national radio station begin broadcasting news of the coup about 5:30 or 6 a.m. He called the Foreign Mission Board immediately and called again several hours later to report all 48 missionaries were safe.

A dusk to dawn curfew was put in effect and airports and borders were closed.

Quiwonkpa was commanding general of the Liberian armed forces until he fled the country in 1983 because Doe accused him of involvement in an alleged coup plot.

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Nashville, Tennessee 37203

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NASHVILLE, TN 37203

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